



Medical School Hotline

The Cancer Research Center of Hawaii University of Hawaii

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The Cancer Research Center of Hawaii is an organized research unit of the University of Hawaii (UH). Together with the School of Medicine, the School of Nursing, and the Pacific Biomedical Research Center (PBRC), the Cancer Research Center constitutes one of the four independent biomedical units at UH Manoa. The Cancer Center was initially organized in 1971 by several research-oriented faculty from the PBRC and the School of Medicine in response to the National Cancer Act. In 1979, the Center received a construction grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) which supported with local matching funds the erection of its five-story building on Lauhala Street adjacent to Queen's Medical Center.

On July 1, 1996, the Cancer Center was awarded a Cancer Center Support Grant from the NCI and became an NCI-designated Cancer Center, a highly coveted designation reserved for cancer centers whose research programs are judged to be of highest quality by a stringent peer review process. There are currently only 59 NCI-designated cancer centers in the nation.

On July 1, 2000, the Cancer Center Support Grant was renewed for five years with an annual budget of over 2 million dollars representing almost a tripling of the past support. The renewal of the Cancer Center Support Grant recognizes the truly remarkable success of Cancer Center faculty in their research efforts as documented by an increasing number of publications (currently more than a hundred annually), many of which appear in prestigious peer-reviewed national and international journals. The successful research by Cancer Center faculty is paralleled by their ability to obtain research funding. The total financial support of the Cancer Center is approximately 20 million dollars annually, the majority of which is derived from national peer-reviewed sources, primarily the NCI, other NIH institutes, and the Department of Defense. Less than 2 million dollars are from the State of Hawaii which implies that Cancer Center faculty convert one state dollar into approximately ten federal dollars. This ratio makes the Cancer Center the most successful research unit of the University of Hawaii. In addition, by employing more than 200 people and infusing over 20 million dollars into the local economy, the Cancer Center is also an economic engine for the State of Hawaii.

The Cancer Center's research programs focus on areas of which Hawaii's environment offers particular opportunities or which are of particular relevance for Hawaii. An overriding research theme is biodiversity that includes the ethnic diversity of Hawaii's population (with their greatly varying risks for different cancers) and the biosphere of Hawaii and other Pacific islands (for discovery of new anticancer agents).

The Center's research activities are currently organized into three research programs.

1. The Cancer Etiology Program encompasses both basic laboratory and epidemiologic scientists who seek to identify factors, both environmental and genetic, that increase or decrease the risk of cancer. Scientists in the program also investigate the molecular mechanisms that underlie the carcinogenic process. Particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between diet, genes, and cancer.

2. The Prevention and Control Program designs, develops, implements, and evaluates interventions to reduce cancer incidence, morbidity, and mortality and to improve the quality of life for cancer patients. Research in this area spans the continuum from primary prevention and early detection to treatment and long-term survivorship. Consistent with the Cancer Center's thematic focus, current studies explore ethnic differences in risk behavior, biological risk, health services utilization, and psychological factors that relate to cancer.

3. The Natural Products Program is a program of drug discovery based on the historical experience that many of today's active anticancer drugs are derived from naturally-occurring products. As a multidisciplinary approach which involves biologists, chemists, and pharmacologists, the members of the Natural Products Program collect biological specimens, mainly microorganisms and plants, from Hawaii and other Pacific Islands, screen for anticancer activity, isolate and chemically identify the active compounds, and study their mode of action. A major success of this program is the identification of cryptophycin, a compound which bears the promise of becoming a new anticancer agent. The compound is licensed to a major pharmaceutical company and is undergoing phase II testing.

In addition to the three research programs, the Cancer Center also conducts the following activities. 1. The Clinical Trials Unit offers approximately 150 clinical trials to cancer patients in the State of Hawaii. The activity is primarily funded by the NCI through a minority-based community clinical oncology program. Currently, only 2 to 3 percent of Hawaii adult cancer patients are enrolled in clinical trials. In contrast, approximately 85 percent of Hawaii pediatric cancer patients are enrolled in clinical trial protocols. As the clinical trial enrollment is community-based, the vast majority of clinical trials conducted represent national cooperative group Phase III studies.

2. The Hawaii Tumor Registry is a program that receives its primary support from the NCI's Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program as well as support from the Department of Health. The registry is one of ten SEER sites nationwide.

3. Cancer Information Service, an NCI-supported nationwide network, is the source for the latest and most accurate cancer information for patients, their families, the general public, and health professionals. The information is provided through a toll free telephone number (1-800-4-CANCER) as well as outreach activities, frequently in collaboration with other local organizations to raise cancer awareness, particularly within native Hawaiians and other minorities in the State.

4. The Consultation Clinic provides consultation to cancer patients, mainly for second opinions and treatment decisions. This service, currently not very well-publicized in the community, represents the only clinical service. The Center faculty does not provide continuing care for cancer patients.

Although the primary focus of Cancer Center faculty is research,

virtually all Center faculty participate in various educational activities. These include primarily research education with activities at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional student levels. The faculty also participate in formal classroom teaching activities throughout various schools and colleges of UH including public health, medicine, psychology, and nutrition. Several Cancer Center members are graduate faculty of the new graduate program in Cell and Molecular Biology, a partnership of the Cancer Center, PBRC, and the School of Medicine. The Cancer Center also offers accredited continuing medical education, primarily targeted to the local physician community.

Despite its multitude of activities and a very successful research operation, the Cancer Center faces significant challenges. For one, the total number of full-time Cancer Center faculty is less than 20. That number is extremely small for the size of the research operation and makes the research programs vulnerable. Recruitment of additional faculty, however, is hampered by the severe shortage of space. The success of Cancer Center faculty in generating extramural research support has been paralleled by an increased number of research personnel, leading to overcrowding of the Cancer Center building and the necessity to operate several activities in satellite facilities elsewhere. Future growth and development will require additional space for the Cancer Center, preferably in the form of a new, dedicated building.

Another shortcoming of the Cancer Center, experienced daily by many Cancer Center faculty and clearly identified by the NCI review group that evaluated the Center in connection with the recent renewal of the Cancer Center Support Grant, is the difficulty of conducting patient-oriented research. Because the Cancer Center does not have its own patient base, translational and clinical research are cumbersome, and many types of clinical investigations such as innovative phase I trials with newly developed therapeutics cannot be performed. This is lamentable because it not only precludes the clinical testing of new drugs discovered in the Natural Products Program but also deprives all of Hawaii's cancer patients access to new investigational drugs. The Cancer Center will not be able to obtain the NCI designation as a "Comprehensive Cancer Center" without a clinical research program. It is anticipated that the Cancer Center in partnership with one or several of the major teaching hospitals will be able to develop a comprehensive outpatient care facility which would significantly expand the research capabilities of the Cancer Center and simultaneously improve the care for Hawaii's cancer patients.

The year 2000 will mark the 30th anniversary of the Cancer Research Center. Given the successes of the Center, this anniversary will be good reason to celebrate.


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